



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sequoia & Kings Canyon
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Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks News Release

For Immediate Release – October 23, 2003 – Jody Lyle (559) 565-3703, Alexandra Picavet (559) 565-3131, or William Tweed (559) 565-3130.

Washington Tree Damaged in Giant Fire Parks Take Steps to Protect “Trees of Special Interest”

As previously reported in a news release on September 20, the Washington Tree, the world’s second largest tree, was damaged during the lightning-caused Giant Fire.

The fire caused the collapse of the upper western side of the tree including its characteristic large branch. Considerable green foliage remains on the northeast side and scientists who assessed the tree’s condition believe that it will survive. After re-measuring the height, it appears that the 230-foot tree lost approximately 16-23 feet.

Prior to the Giant Fire, the Washington Tree was already structurally damaged. This damage was the result of dozens of natural fires that occurred before the park was created in 1890. In 2000, a researcher rappelled more than 115 feet down into the hollow tree and observed considerable rotten and decaying wood. Such wood, when dry, is highly susceptible to fire. It is uncertain whether the tree caught fire from a flying ember or from a creeping ground fire.

The lightning-caused Giant Fire was discovered in the Giant Forest of Sequoia National Park on July 30, 2003. Planning efforts began immediately to manage the ignition as a *fire use project*, which is a management response allowing lightning-caused fires to spread naturally and improve forest health. Park staff from many different disciplines worked together to plan a response to this natural event. It took nearly six weeks for the fire to reach the Washington Tree.

The National Park Service conducts prescribed fires and manages natural fires in sequoia groves to reduce hazardous fuels, stimulate germination, and maintain the natural process of fire. Research shows that giant sequoia groves survived regular fires throughout history, every 5-20 years on average. While the fire program seeks to maintain an entire functioning ecosystem, the parks recognize the significance of specific “named” trees, like the Washington Tree.

Over the next few months, park managers, scientists, and fire personnel will work to reassess procedures for “special tree” protection during both planned and unplanned fires. “I want to outline realistic measures for protecting special trees,” says Superintendent Richard H. Martin. “We want to do all we reasonably can while remembering that fire is a natural part of a sequoia forest.”

Some trail closures remain in effect in the Giant Forest area, including the trail to the Washington Tree, due to active fire and unstable trees. These trails will stay closed until winter storms extinguish the fire. When the trails reopen in the future, the public is welcome, as always, to hike into the area.

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